ERASMUS

R. C. JEBB

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ERASMUS

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BY

R. C. JEBB, LITT. D.

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF GREEK AND FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE
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ERASMUS.

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS was born at Rotterdam on the 27th of October, 1467. His father, Gerhard de Praet, belonged to a respectable family at Gouda, a small town of south Holland, not far from Rótterdam: his mother, Margaret, was the daughter of a physician at Sevenberg in Brabant. Gerhard's parents were resolved that he should become a monk. Meanwhile he was secretly betrothed to Margaret. His family succeeded in preventing their marriage, but not their union. After the birth of a son—the elder and only brother of Erasmus—Gerhard fled to Rome.

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A false rumour of Margaret's death there induced him, in his despair, to enter the priesthood. On returning to Holland, he found Margaret living at Gouda with his two boys. He was true to the irrevocable vows which parted him from her. After a few years, during which the supervision of their children's education had been a common solace, she died, while still young; and Gerhard, broken-hearted, soon followed her to the grave.

The boy afterwards so famous had been given his father's Christian name, Gerhard, meaning 'beloved.' Desiderius is barbarous Latin for that, and Erasmus is barbarous Greek for it. If the great scholar devised those appellations for himself, it must have been at an early age. Afterwards, when he stood godfather to the son of his friend Froben the printer, he gave the boy the correct form of his own second name,—viz., Erasmius. The combination, Desiderius Erasmus, is probably due to the fact that he had been known as Gerhard Gerhardson. It was a

singular fortune for a master of literary style to be designated by two words which mean the same thing, and are both incorrect.

He was sent to school at Gouda when he was four years old. Here it was perceived that he had a fine voice; and so he was taken to Utrecht, and placed in the Cathedral choir. But he had no gift for music. At nine years' of age he was removed from Utrecht to a good school at Deventer. His precocious genius soon showed itself, and his future eminence was predicted by the famous Rudolph Agricola—one of the first men who brought the new learning across the Alps.

Erasmus was only thirteen when he lost both parents, and was left to the care of three guardians. They wished him to become a monk: it was the simplest way to dispose of a ward. The boy loathed the idea; he knew his father's story; and now it seemed as if the same shadow was to fall on his own life also. However, the guardians sent him to a monastic seminary at

Hertogenbosch, where the brethren undertook to prepare youth for the cloister. The three years which he spent there—*i.e.*, from thirteen to sixteen—were wholly wasted and miserable: he learned nothing, and his health, never strong, was injured by cruel severities. 'The plan of these men,' he said afterwards, 'when they see a boy of high and lively spirit, is to break and humble it by stripes, by threats, by reproaches, and various other means.' The struggle with the monks and his guardians was a long one; when menaces failed, they tried blandishments,—especially they promised him a paradise of literary leisure. At last he gave in. When he was about eighteen, he took the vows of a Canon Regular of the order of St Augustine. Looking back afterwards on the arts by which he had been won, he asks, 'What is kidnapping, if this is not?'

The next five years—till he was twenty-three—were spent in his monastery at Stein, near Gouda. The general life of the place was odious

to him ; but he found one friend, named William Hermann. They used to read the Latin classics together—secretly, for such studies were viewed with some suspicion. It was then that he laid the basis of his Latin style, and became thoroughly familiar with some of the best Latin authors.

In 1491 he left the monastery, having been invited by the Bishop of Cambray, Henry de Bergis, to reside with him as his secretary. Soon afterwards he took orders ; and the Bishop subsequently enabled him to enter the University of Paris, for the purpose of studying theology. He was then, perhaps, about twenty-seven years of age.

At this point we may attempt,—aided by Holbein, and by tradition—to form some idea of his personal appearance. Erasmus was a rather small man, slight, but well-built ; he had, as became a Teuton, blue eyes, yellowish or light brown hair, and a fair complexion. The face is a remarkable one. It has two chief characteristics,—quiet, watchful sagacity,—and

humour, half playful, half sarcastic. The eyes are calm, critical, steadily observant, with a half-latent twinkle in them; the nose is straight, rather long, and pointed; the rippling curves of the large mouth indicate a certain energetic vivacity of temperament, and tenacity of purpose; while the pose of the head suggests vigilant caution, almost timidity. As we continue to study the features, they speak more and more clearly of insight and refinement; of a worldly yet very gentle shrewdness; of cheerful self-mastery; and of a mind which has its weapons ready at every instant. But there is no suggestion of enthusiasm,—unless it be the literary enthusiasm of a student. It is difficult to imagine those cool eyes kindled by any glow of passion, or that genial serenity broken by a spiritual struggle. This man, we feel, would be an intellectual champion of truth and reason; his wit might be as the spear of Ithuriel, and his satire as the sword of Gideon; but he has not the face of a hero or a martyr.

On entering the University of Paris, Erasmus took up his residence at the Montaigu College. It was on the south side of the Seine, not far from the Sorbonne, and is said to have stood on the site now occupied by the Library of St. Geneviève. The Rector of the College was a man of estimable character; but he believed in extreme privation—which he had himself endured in youth—as the best school for students of theology. Erasmus has described the life there. The work imposed on the students was excessively severe. They were also half starved; meat was proscribed altogether; eggs, usually the reverse of fresh, formed the staple of food; the inmates had to fetch their drinking water from a polluted well. When wine was allowed, it was such as implied by the nickname 'Vinegar College' (a Latin pun on Montaigu). Many of the sleeping-rooms were on a ground-floor where the plaster was mouldering on the damp walls, and in such a neighbourhood that the air breathed by the sleepers—

when they could sleep—was pestilential. One year's experience of this place—these are the words of Erasmus—doomed many youths of the brightest gifts and promise either to death, or to blindness, or to madness, or to leprosy; 'some of these,' he says, 'I knew myself,—and assuredly every one of us ran the danger.' Similar testimony is given by his younger contemporary, Rabelais:—'The unhappy creatures at that College are treated worse than galley-slaves among the Moors and Tartars, or than murderers in a criminal prison.'

No wonder Erasmus, a delicate man at the best, soon fell ill: indeed, his constitution was permanently impaired. He went back to the Bishop at Cambray. Then, after a short visit to Holland, he returned to Paris—but not to the Montaigu College. He rented a one-room lodging, and resolved to support himself during his University course by taking private pupils. It was a hard struggle that he went through

then; but better days were at hand. He had already become known in Paris as a scholar of brilliant promise, and especially as an admirable Latinist. Latin was then the general language, not only of learning, but of polite intercourse between persons of different nationalities; and to speak Latin with fluent grace—an art in which Erasmus was already pre-eminent—was the best passport to cultivated society in Paris, whose University attracted students from all countries. Then he had a bright and nimble fancy, a keen sense of humour, a frank manner, and also rare tact; in short, he was a delightful companion, without ever seeking to dominate his company. One of his pupils was a young Englishman, William Blunt, Lord Mountjoy, who was studying at Paris. Mountjoy settled an annual pension of a hundred crowns on Erasmus, and presently persuaded him to visit England.

This was in 1498. Erasmus was now thirty-one. For eighteen years—ever since he left the

school at Deventer—his life had been a hard one. The coarse rigours of Hertogenbosch, the midnight oil of Stein, the miseries of the Montaigu College, the later battle with poverty in Paris—all these had left their marks on that slight form, and that keen, calm face. Men who met him in England must have found it difficult to believe that he was so young. The sallow cheeks, the sunken eyes, the bent shoulders, the worn air of the whole man seemed to speak of a more advanced age. But neither then, nor at any later time, was he other than youthful in buoyant vivacity of spirit, in restless activity of mind, in untiring capacity for work.

And now a new world opened before him. In England he was not only an honoured guest, but, for the first time, perhaps, since he left school, he found himself among men from whom he had something to learn. He went to Oxford, with a letter of introduction to Richard Charnock, Prior of a house of his own order, the Canons Regular of St Augustine, and was hospitably

received by him in the College of St Mary the Virgin. At that time the scholastic theology and philosophy still held the field in both the English Universities—as everywhere else, north of the Alps. But at Oxford there were a few eminent men who had studied the new learning in Italy, and had brought the love for it home with them. Erasmus was just too late to see William Selling of All Souls College, who died in 1495,—one of the first Englishmen who endeavoured to introduce Greek studies in this country. And he was too early to meet William Lilly, who was still abroad then. But he met some other scholars, who were among the earliest teachers or advocates of Greek at Oxford,—William Grocyn, William Latimer, and Thomas Linacre ;—the last-named, who became Founder of the Royal College of Physicians, had studied at Florence under Politian and Chalcondyles. Erasmus speaks with especial praise of Grocyn's comprehensive learning, and of Linacre's finished taste. It is certain that

his intercourse with the Oxford Hellenists must have been both instructive and stimulating to him; we can see, too, that it strengthened his desire to visit Italy. On the other hand, his letters show that when he left Oxford in 1500, he had not advanced far in the study of Greek. The years from 1500 to 1505, during which he worked intensely hard at Greek by himself in Paris, were those in which his knowledge of that language was chiefly built up.

The two Oxonians with whom Erasmus formed the closest friendship were John Colet and Thomas More. Colet was just a year his senior, and was then lecturing on St Paul's Epistles in what was quite a new way,—endeavouring to bring out their meaning historically and practically. He was not a Greek scholar; but it was he who, more than anyone else, encouraged Erasmus to print the New Testament in the original tongue. Thomas More, who was then a youth of twenty, had

left Oxford, and was reading law in London, where Erasmus first met him. The story that they met at dinner, and that, before an introduction, each recognised the other by his wit, is perhaps apocryphal. At any rate, it expresses the truth that such perfectly congenial minds would be drawn to each other at once.

In the winter of 1499 Erasmus visited Lord Mountjoy at Greenwich. It would seem, too, that he had a glimpse of Henry VII.'s Court, He writes that he has become 'a better horseman, and a tolerable courtier.' In January, 1500, just before Erasmus left England, Thomas More went down from London to Greenwich, to say farewell,—bringing with him another young lawyer named Arnold. More proposed a walk, and took his friends to call at a large house in the neighbouring village of Eltham. They were shown into a hall where some children were at play: it was, in fact, the royal nursery. The eldest, a boy of nine years old, was the future Henry VIII.; he was not then Prince of Wales,

but Duke of York, his brother Arthur being still alive. The tutor in charge of the children was John Skelton, the poet. Three days afterwards, in fulfilment of a promise, Erasmus sent the little Prince a Latin poem; it is in praise of England, and of Henry VII. There is no doubt that the praise of England came from his heart: his letters show that.

At the end of January, 1500, he sailed from Dover for France. A serious mishap befell him just before he went on board. He carried with him a considerable sum of money, contributed by friends for the purpose of enabling him to visit Italy. The custom-house officers at Dover deprived him of nearly the whole, on plea of a law forbidding the exportation of gold coin of the realm above a certain amount. His friends at court afterwards tried to recover it for him,—but in vain. On reaching Paris, he fell ill. When he recovered, he set hard to work. The next five years were spent chiefly at Paris, with occasional visits to Orleans or the Netherlands.

They form a quiet yet memorable period of his life. In 1500 he published his first collection of proverbial sayings from the classics,—the *Adagia*, —which, in its enlarged form, afterwards brought him so much fame. And during these years his incessant labour at Greek gradually qualified him for yet greater tasks. He had no teacher in Paris; and, though not absolutely in want, he had difficulty in buying all the books that he required.

Towards the end of 1505 Erasmus paid a second visit to England,—staying only about six months. On this occasion he visited Cambridge. The Grace Book of our University shows that permission was given to Desiderius Erasmus to take the degrees of B.D. and D.D. by accumulation. It would seem, however, that he took the degree of B.D. only; so Dr John Caius says, and he must be right, if it is true that in the doctor's diploma which Erasmus received at Turin in 1506 he was described as a bachelor of theology. Had he possessed the

higher degree, it would have been mentioned in the Turin document. During this second visit he saw a good deal of More and other old acquaintances. Grocyn took him to Lambeth, and introduced him to Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England,—who, in the sequel, was one of his best friends.

He had now become able to realise the dream of his youth—to visit Italy. It was arranged that he should accompany the two sons of Dr Baptista Boyer, chief physician to Henry VII., who were going to Genoa; a royal courier was to escort them as far as Bologna. The party left Dover in the spring of 1506, and were tossed about for four days in the channel. After a rest at Paris, they set out on horseback for Turin. Erasmus has vividly described the squalid German inns, which he contrasts with those of France. Another discomfort of the journey was that the tutor and the courier quarrelled a good deal. At Turin—his companions having left him—he stayed several

weeks, and received from the University the degree of Doctor in Theology.

The stay of Erasmus in Italy lasted three years—from the summer of 1506 to that of 1509. It is well to remember what was the general state of things in Italy at that time,—for the impressions which Erasmus received there had a strong and lasting effect upon his mind. In literature the humanistic revival had now passed its zenith, and was declining into that frivolous pedantry which Erasmus afterwards satirised in the 'Ciceronian.' Architecture, sculpture and painting were indeed active; Bramante, Michael Angelo and Raphael were at work. But the fact which chiefly arrested the attention of Erasmus was that Italian soil was the common ground on which the princes of Europe were prosecuting their intricate ambitions, and that the Pope had unsheathed the sword in pursuit of temporal advantage. Julius II. was already an elderly man, but full of military ardour. Venice seemed to be his ulterior object; mean-

while, in the autumn of 1506, he had reduced Perugia and Bologna. Erasmus was in Bologna when the Pope entered in November, and the late roses of that strangely mild autumn were strewn in his path by the shouting multitudes who hailed him as a warrior equal to his Roman namesake of old, the conqueror of Gaul. Erasmus was at Rome, too, in the following March, when the Pope celebrated his triumph with a martial pomp which no Caesar could have surpassed. Then came the revolt of Genoa from France,—the futile war of Maximilian, 'Emperor Elect,' against Venice,—and lastly the iniquitous League of Cambray, by which Maximilian, the Pope, Louis XII. and Ferdinand of Spain banded themselves together for the spoliation of the Venetian Republic. Such things as these sank deep into the heart of Erasmus. 'When princes purpose to exhaust a commonwealth'—he wrote afterwards—'they speak of a just war; when they unite for that object, they call it peace.'

But there was a bright side also to his years in Italy; in many places he enjoyed intercourse with learned men; and he formed some enduring friendships. At Venice he spent several months with Aldus in 1508, and saw an enlarged edition of the *Adagia* through his famous press. The kind of reputation which he had now won may be seen from his own account of his visit to Cardinal Grimani at Rome, in 1509: it is a characteristic little story, and ought to be told in his own words. 'There was no one to be seen in the courtyard of the Cardinal's palace,' he says, 'or in the entrance-hall...I went upstairs alone. I passed through the first, the second, the third room;—still no one to be seen, and not a door shut; I could not help wondering at the solitude. Coming to the last room, I there found only one person,—a Greek, I thought,—a physician,—with his head shaved, standing at the open door. I asked him if I could see the Cardinal; he replied that he was in an inner room, with some visitors. As I said

no more, he asked me my business. I replied, 'I wished to pay my respects to him, if it had been convenient, but as he is engaged, I will call again.' I was just going away, but paused at a window to look at the view; the Greek came back to me, and asked if I wished to leave any message. 'You need not disturb him,' I said,—'I will call again soon.' Then he asked my name, and I told him. The instant he heard it, before I could stop him, he hurried into the inner room, and quickly returning, begged me not to go—I should be admitted directly. The Cardinal received me, not as a man of his high degree might have received one of my humble condition, but like an equal: a chair was placed for me, and we conversed for more than two hours. He would not even allow me to be uncovered,—a wonderful condescension in a man of his rank.' Grimani pressed Erasmus to stay permanently at Rome. But he replied that he just received a summons to England, which left him no choice.

In the April of that year, 1509, the little boy whom Erasmus had seen in the nursery at Eltham had become Henry VIII.; and in May, Mountjoy had written to his old tutor, urging him to return. Erasmus reached England early in the summer of 1510. Soon afterwards, in More's house at Bucklersbury, he rapidly wrote his famous satire, the *Encomium Moriae*, or 'Praise of Folly,' in which Folly celebrates her own praises as the great source of human pleasures. He had been meditating this piece on the long journey from Rome; it is a kaleidoscope of his experiences in Italy, and of earlier memories. As to the title, *Moria*, the Greek word for 'folly,' was a playful allusion, of course, to the name of his wise and witty host. This 'Praise of Folly' is a satire, not only in the modern but in the original sense of that word,—a medley. All classes, all callings, are sportively viewed on the weak side. But in relation to the author's own life and times, the most important topics are the various abuses in the Church, the

pedantries of the schoolmen, and the selfish wars of kings. If this eloquent Folly, as Erasmus presents her, most often wears the mocking smile of Lucian or Voltaire, there are moments also when she wields the terrible lash of Juvenal or of Swift. The popularity of the satire, throughout Europe, was boundless. The mask of jest which it wore was its safeguard; how undignified, how absurd it would have been for a Pope or a King to care what was said by Folly! And, just for that reason, the *Encomium Moriae* must be reckoned among the forces which prepared the Reformation.

Where was Erasmus to settle now? That was the great question for him. He decided it by going to Cambridge, on the invitation of Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester, who was then Chancellor of the University. Rooms were assigned to him in Queens' College, of which Fisher had been President a few years before. In that beautiful old cloister at Queens', where the spirit of the fifteenth century seems to

linger, an entrance at the south-east corner gives access to a small court which is known as the court of Erasmus. His lodgings were in a square turret of red brick at the south-east angle of the court. His study was probably a good-sized room which is now used as a lecture-room ; on the floor above this was his bedroom, with an adjoining attic for his servant. From the south windows of these rooms—looking on the modern Silver Street—he had a wide view over what was then open country, interspersed with cornfields ; the windings of the river could be seen as far as the Trumpington woods. The walk on the west side of the Cam, which is called the walk of Erasmus, was not laid out till 1684 : in his time it was open ground, with probably no trees upon it. His first letter from Cambridge is dated Dec., 1510, and this date must be right, or nearly so. He says himself that he taught Greek here before he lectured on theology ; and also that, after his arrival, the commencement of his Greek teaching was

delayed by ill-health. Now he was elected to the Lady Margaret Professorship of Divinity in 1511, and in those days the election was ordered to take place on the last day of term before the Long Vacation. His residence, then, can hardly have begun later than the early part of 1511.

It is interesting to think of him—now a man of forty-four, but prematurely old in appearance —moving about the narrow streets or quiet courts of that medieval Cambridge which was just about to become the modern—a transformation due, in no small measure, to the influence of his own labours. Eleven of our Colleges existed. Peterhouse was in the third century of its life; others also were of a venerable age. Erasmus would have heard the rumour that a house of his own order, the Hospital of the Brethren of St John, was about to be merged in a new and more splendid foundation, the College of St John the Evangelist. Where Trinity College now stands, he would have seen the separate institutions which, after another generation, were to

be united by Henry VIII.; he would have seen a hostel of the Benedictines where Magdalene College was soon to arise; the Franciscans on the site of Sidney Sussex, and the Dominicans on the site of Emmanuel. North of Queens' College, he would have found the convent of the Carmelites; and then, rising in lonely majesty—with no other College buildings as yet on its south side—the chapel of King's, completed as to the walls, but not yet roofed.

When Erasmus began his Greek lectures in his rooms at Queens', his text-book was the elementary grammar of Manuel Chrysoloras, entitled the 'Questions',—which had been the standard book all through the fifteenth century. He next took up the larger and more advanced grammar of Theodorus Gaza, published in 1495, —which he afterwards translated into Latin. We have a specimen of his own Greek composition at this period. In 1511 he went from Cambridge to visit the celebrated shrine of the Virgin at Walsingham in Norfolk—the same

where, two years later, Queen Catherine gave thanks after the battle of Flodden. As a votive offering, he hung up on the wall a short set of Greek iambics, which are extant: they are to the effect that, while others bring rich gifts and crave worldly blessings, he asks only for a pure heart. There are some faults of metre, but the diction is classical and idiomatic: probably no one in Europe at that time, unless it were Budaeus, could have written better. When Erasmus revisited Walsingham a little later, he found that these verses had sorely puzzled the monks and their friends; there had been much wiping of eye-glasses; and opinions differed as to whether the characters were Arabic, or purely arbitrary. Erasmus did not get many hearers for his Greek lectures, and was rather disappointed; but some, at least, of his pupils were ardent; thus he describes Henry Bullock of Queens'—the 'Bovillus' of his letters—as 'working hard at Greek.' And the impulse which he gave can be judged from the rapid progress of the new learning at

Cambridge. Writing to him in 1516—three years after he had left—Bullock says, 'people here are devoting themselves eagerly to Greek literature.' In a letter to Everard, the Stadtholder of Holland, in 1520, Erasmus says:—'Theology is flourishing at Paris and at Cambridge as nowhere else: and why? Because they are adapting themselves to the tendencies of the age; because the new studies, which are ready, if need be, to storm an entrance, are not repelled by them as foes, but received as welcome guests.' In another letter he remarks that, while Greek studies have been instituted in both the English Universities, at Cambridge they are pursued peacefully (*tranquille*),—owing, he says, to Fisher's influence. He is alluding to those struggles at Oxford between the adherents of the schoolmen and the new learning which came to a head in the 'Trojan' and 'Grecian' riots of 1519, and led to Wolsey's founding the readership of Greek. Oxford had been, in England, the great theological University of the middle

ages, and the scholastic system died hardest there.

Erasmus taught Greek without any formal appointment, so far as we know, from the University; though Fisher, the Chancellor, may have arranged that he should receive a stipend. The first man formally appointed Greek reader was Richard Croke in 1519; who speaks, indeed, of Erasmus as having been 'professor of Greek,' but probably means simply lecturer. The official status of Erasmus was that of Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity. The election to the Chair was then biennial. At the end of his term—*i.e.*, in the summer of 1513—Erasmus was re-elected. This is a noteworthy fact. The electing body comprised the whole Faculty of Theology, regulars as well as seculars. The 'Praise of Folly' must by that time have been well-known here. If Erasmus was not universally acceptable to the schoolmen or to the monks of Cambridge, at any rate the general respect for his character and attainments carried the day.

When we try to imagine him in his rooms at Queens', we are not to picture him as a popular teacher, with the youth of the University crowding to learn from him; his life here was that of a recluse student, in weak health, whose surroundings were in some respects uncongenial to him, but who had a group of devoted pupils, and some chosen older friends. From 1508 to the end of his life he suffered from a painful organic disease, which obliged him to be careful of his diet. When he dined in the old College hall at Queens', above the west cloister—now part of the President's Lodge—the ghosts of the College benefactors, whose heads are carved on the oak wainscoting, would have been grieved if they could have known what he thought of Cambridge beverages; he writes to his Italian friend Ammonius—afterwards Latin Secretary to Henry VIII.—begging for a cask of Greek wine. His favourite exercise was riding; and he made frequent excursions. Meanwhile he accomplished a surprising amount of work. He

was busy with the text of Seneca, with translations from Basil, with Latin manuals for St Paul's School, just founded by his friend Colet—and with much else. It was here that he began revising the text of Jerome's works. 'My mind is in such a glow over Jerome,' he writes, 'that I could fancy myself actually inspired.' But there is one labour above all that entitles those rooms in the old tower at Queens' to be reckoned among the sacred places of literature. It was there in 1512 that the Lady Margaret Professor completed a collation of the Greek Text of the New Testament. Four years later, his edition—the first ever published—appeared at Basle.

In 1513 Cambridge was visited by the plague, and nearly every one fled from it. During some months of the autumn, Erasmus had scarcely heard a foot-fall in the cloister beneath his rooms. At the end of the year, he finally left the University. Some of his reasons for going can be conjectured from his letters. They express disappointment with England:

and they speak of poverty. It is well to observe the sense in which these complaints are to be understood. After 1510 Erasmus was never actually indigent. Archbishop Warham had offered him the Rectory of Aldington in Kent; Erasmus declined it, because he could not speak English—he never learned any modern language, and besides his own vernacular, spoke Latin only: then Warham gave him a pension from the benefice. Fisher and Mountjoy were also liberal. At Cambridge, with these resources, and the stipend of his Chair, it has been computed that his income must have been equivalent to about £700 at the present day. But his mode of living, though not profuse, was not frugal. Thus he himself enumerates the following heads of his expenditure;—servants (*'famulorum'*)—the aid of amanuenses—the cost of keeping a horse, or horses (*ἱπποτροφία*)—frequent journeys—and social or charitable obligations: he disliked, he says, to be penurious (*'hic animus abhorrens a sordibus'*). The fact seems to

be that he had formed exaggerated hopes of what Henry VIII. would do for him. His immediate motive for departure, however, was probably the desire to supervise the printing of the Greek Testament. There was then no English press where such a work could be done so well as abroad. He had heard that Froben, the famous printer at Basle, was about to publish the works of Jerome; and to Basle he went. Another circumstance helped to decide him. Prince Charles,—afterwards the Emperor Charles V.,—had offered him the post of honorary privy-councillor, with a pension,—and this without binding him to live in the Netherlands. At this time Erasmus would have been welcomed in any country of Europe; Cardinal Canossa, the Papal legate, was anxious to secure him for Rome. At a later period, when his fame stood yet higher, Henry VIII. would have been glad to lure him back; but it was then too late.

So, in 1514, Erasmus left England—not to return, except for a few months in the following

year. He was now forty-seven. Twenty-two years of life remained to him. The history of these years is essentially that of his untiring and astonishing literary activity. In his external life there is little to record beyond changes of residence,—from Basle to the University of Louvain in Brabant,—from Louvain back to Basle,—from Basle to Freiburg,—and once more to Basle, where, in 1536, he died. The clue to this later period is given by two threads, which are indeed but strands of a single cord,—his influence on the revival of learning, and his attitude towards the Reformation.

In the younger days of Erasmus the Italian cultivation of classical literature had attained its highest point, and was already verging towards decline. More than a century had passed since Petrarch had kindled the first enthusiasm. It requires some effort of the imagination for us to realise what that movement meant. The men of the fourteenth century lived under a Church which claimed the surrender of the reason, not

not only in matters of faith, but in all knowledge: philosophy and science could speak only by the doctors whom she sanctioned. When the fourteenth century began to study the classics, the first feeling was one of joy in the newly revealed dignity of the human mind; it was a strange and delightful thing, as they gradually came to know the great writers of ancient Greece and Rome, to see the reason moving freely, exploring, speculating, discussing, without restraint. And then those children of the middle age were surprised and charmed by the forms of classical expression,— so different from anything that had been familiar to them. Borrowing an old Latin word, they called this new learning *humanity*: for them, however, the phrase had a depth of meaning undreamt of by Cicero. Now, for the first time, they felt that they had entered into full possession of themselves; nothing is more characteristic of the Italian renaissance than the self-asserting individuality of the chief actors: each strives to throw the work of his own spirit

into relief; the common life falls into the background; the history of that age is the history of men rather than of communities.

In the progress of this Italian humanism three chief phases may be roughly distinguished. The first closes with the end of the fourteenth century,—the time of Petrarch and his immediate followers,—the morning-time of discovery. Then, in the first half of the fifteenth century, the discovered materials were classified, and organised in great libraries; Greek manuscripts, too, were translated into Latin,—not that the versions might be taken as substitutes for the original, but to aid the study of Greek itself. The men of this second period were gathered around Cosmo de' Medici at Florence, or Nicholas V. at Rome. The third stage was that in which criticism, both of form and of matter, was carried to a higher level, chiefly by the joint efforts of scholars grouped in select societies or academies, such as the Platonic academy at Florence, of which Ficino was

the centre. The greatest man of this time,—the greatest genius of the literary renaissance in Italy,—was Angelo Poliziano; he died in 1494, when Erasmus was twenty-seven.

With Erasmus a new period opens. Two things broadly distinguish him, as a scholar, from the men before and after him. First, he was not only a refined humanist, writing for the fastidious few, and prizing no judgment but theirs; he took the most profitable authors of antiquity,—profitable in a moral as well as a literary sense,—chose out the best things in them,—and sought to make these things widely known,—applying their wisdom or wit to the circumstances of his own day. Secondly, in all his work he had an educational aim,—and this of the largest kind. The evils of his age,—in Church, in State, in the daily lives of men,—seemed to him to have their roots in ignorance,—ignorance of what Christianity meant,—ignorance of what the Bible taught,—ignorance of what the noblest and most gifted minds of the

past, whether Christian or pagan, had contributed to the instruction of the human race. Let true knowledge only spread, and under its enlightening and humanising influence a purer religion and a better morality will gradually prevail. Erasmus was a man of the world; but with his keen intellect, so quickly susceptible to all impressions, he made the mistake, not uncommon for such temperaments, of overrating the rapidity with which intellectual influences permeate the masses of mankind. However, no one was ever more persistently or brilliantly true to an idea than Erasmus was to his; and it is wonderful how much he achieved.

His services to the new learning took various forms. He wrote school-books, bringing out his view that boys were kept too long over grammar, and ought to begin reading some good author as soon as possible. His own *Colloquies* were meant partly as models of colloquial Latin; the book was long a standard one in education. These lively dialogues are prose idylls with an ethical

purpose,—the dramatic expression of the writer's views on the life of the day. Thus the dialogue between the Learned Lady and the Abbot depicts monastic illiteracy; that between the Soldier and the Carthusian brings out the seamy side of the military calling. Lucian has influenced the form; but the dramatic skill which blends earnestness with humour is the author's own; there are touches here and there which might fairly be called Shakspearian. Then he made collections of striking thoughts and fine passages in the classics. His chief book of this kind was the *Adagia*. Many of the classical proverbs are made texts for little essays on the affairs of the day. Thus he takes up a Latin proverb, 'The beetle pursues the eagle'—based on the fable of the beetle avenging itself for an insult by destroying the eagle's eggs—the moral being that the most exalted wrong-doer is never safe from the vengeance of the humblest victim. This suggests to him an ingenious satire on the misdeeds of great princes—typified by the eagle—

and their results. Later in life, he brought out the *Apophthegms*—a collection of good sayings, chiefly from Plutarch. His editions of classical authors were numerous: the best was that of Terence,—his favourite poet; the next best was that of Seneca. His principal editions of Greek authors belong to the last five years of his life, and were less important. Speaking of these editions generally, we may say that they were valuable in two ways,—by making the authors themselves more accessible, and by furnishing improved texts. Then he made many Latin translations from Greek poetry and prose. Mention is due also to his dialogue on the pronunciation of Greek and Latin,—published in 1528. It was especially a protest against the confusion of the vowels in the modern Greek pronunciation, and against the modern disregard of quantity in favour of the stress accent. His views ultimately fixed the continental pronunciation of Greek, which is still known in Greece by his name (ἡ Ἐράσμου προφορά). At Cam-

bridge it was introduced a little later by Thomas Smith and John Cheke. Along with this dialogue appeared another,—the amusing *Ciceronian.* It is an appeal to common-sense against an absurd affectation which marked the dotage of Italian humanism. Bembo and his disciples would not use a single word or phrase which did not occur in Cicero. Their purism moreover rejected all modern terms: a Cardinal became an 'augur,' a nun a 'vestal,' the Papal tiara was 'the fillet of Romulus.' Most ludicrous of all, because Cicero was a statesman, the modern Ciceronian, writing to his friends from the profound seclusion of his study, deemed it a stylistic duty to imply that he lived in a vortex of politics. The gist of what Erasmus says is merely that other ancients besides Cicero wrote good Latin, and that a true Ciceronianism would adjust itself to its surroundings. No one, it should be added, had a more intelligent admiration for Cicero than Erasmus himself.

We see, then, the peculiar place which he

holds in the history of the new learning. It may be allowed that, if the study of classical antiquity be viewed as a progressive science, he did much less to advance it than was done by some other great scholars of a later period. He did not enlarge the boundaries of knowledge in that field as they were afterwards enlarged by the special labours of Joseph Scaliger, of Isaac Casaubon, or of Richard Bentley. But the work which Erasmus did was one which, at that time, was of the first necessity for the northern nations. In his genial, popular way he made them feel the value and charm of the classics as literature; he himself was, in fact, a learned man of letters rather than a critical specialist. Let us remember what the state of northern Europe, as regards literature, was in his boyhood. It was sunk,—to use his own words,—in utter barbarism. To know Greek was the next thing to heresy. 'I did my best,' he says, 'to deliver the rising generation from this slough of ignorance, and to inspire them with a taste for

better studies. I wrote, not for Italy, but for Germany and the Netherlands.'

The circulation of his more popular writings, all over Europe, was so enormous that one can compare it only to that of some widely-read modern journal, or of some extraordinarily popular novel. For instance, a Paris bookseller once heard, or invented, a rumour that the Sorbonne was going to condemn the *Colloquies* of Erasmus as heretical; and, being a shrewd man, he instantly printed a new edition of 24,000 copies. A moral treatise by Erasmus, called the *Enchiridion* ('the Christian Soldier's Dagger'), which was a favourite alike with Catholics and with Protestants, was translated into every language of Europe. A Spanish ecclesiastic, writing in 1527, declares that a version of it was in the hands of all classes throughout Spain,—even the smallest country inn could usually show a copy. It may be doubted whether any author's works were ever so frequently reprinted within his life-time as were those of Erasmus.

And wherever his books went, they carried with them the influence of his spirit,—his love of good literature, his loyalty to reason, his quiet common-sense, his hatred of war, his versatile wit, nourished by varied observation of life,—wit which could play gracefully around the slightest theme, or strike with a keen edge at falsehood and wrong,—his desire to make it felt that a good life is not an affair of formal observance, but must begin in the heart.

The works which entitle Erasmus to be called the parent of Biblical criticism are connected with his secular studies by a closer tie than might appear at first sight. His principal concern was always with literature as such; he was, moreover, a practical moralist, anxious to aid in correcting the evils of his time: but he was not distinctively a theologian; and towards dogmatic theology, in particular, he had little inclination. Now, in pursuing his paramount aim—to make the world better by the humanising influences of literature—the enemy with

which he had to do battle was the scholastic philosophy. Hear his words when he is asking how Christians are to convert Turks:—'Shall we put into their hands an Occam, a Durandus, a Scotus, a Gabriel, or an Alvarus? What will they think of us, when they hear of our perplexed subtleties about Instants, Formalities, Quiddities, and Relations?' This was the dreary wilderness of pedantry that had hitherto passed for knowledge. And the scholastic philosophy was securely entrenched behind the scholastic theology. The weapons of that theology were Biblical texts, isolated from their context, and artificially interpreted: the one way to disarm it was to make men know what the Bible really said and meant. Therefore Erasmus felt that his first duty, both as a moralist and as a man of letters, was to promote a knowledge of the Bible. He was not a Hebrew scholar, and could do nothing at first hand with the Old Testament; that province was left to Reuchlin. But in 1516 he published the Greek Testament,—the first

edition which had appeared; for the Complutensian edition, though printed two years earlier, was not issued till 1522. He also wrote a new Latin version of the New Testament, endeavouring to make it more exact than the Vulgate; and added notes. Further, he wrote a series of Latin Paraphrases on all the books of the New Testament except Revelation. These were intended to exhibit the substance and thought of the several books in a more modern form, and so to bring them home more directly to the ordinary reader's mind. The paraphrases were presently translated into English, and every Parish Church in England was furnished with a copy. In the remarkable 'Exhortation' prefixed to his Greek Testament, Erasmus observes that, while the disciples of every other philosophy derive it from the fountain-head, the Christian doctrine alone is not studied at its source. He would like to see the Scriptures translated into every language, and put into the hands of all. 'I long,' he says, 'that the husbandman should

sing them to himself as he follows the plough, that the weaver should hum them to the tune of his shuttle, that the traveller should beguile with them the weariness of his journey.' Then, as to interpretation,—from the medieval expositors, the schoolmen, he appealed to the primitive interpreters, the Fathers of the early Church, who stood nearer to those documents alike in time and in spirit. And first of all to Jerome; for Jerome had essayed, in the fourth century, a work analogous to that which Erasmus was attempting in the sixteenth. Thus it was fitting that his edition of Jerome should appear almost simultaneously with his Greek Testament. He afterwards edited other Latin Fathers; and it was through his translations from the Greek Fathers, especially Chrysostom and Athanasius, that their writings first became better known in the West.

So far, all that Erasmus had said and done was in accord with that general movement of thought which led up to the Reformation.

When Luther came forward, it was expected by many that Erasmus would place himself at his side. But Erasmus never departed an inch from his allegiance to Rome; and in the year before his death Paul III., in appointing him Provost of Deventer, formally acknowledged the services which he had rendered in combating the new opinions. It is important to see as clearly as possible what his position was.

Luther made his protest at Wittenberg in 1517. For four years after that, Erasmus hoped that the matter might be peaceably adjusted. Luther was personally a stranger to him, but had a great admiration for his work, and wrote to him, as to an intellectual leader of whose sympathy he hoped that he might feel sure; Erasmus wrote back kindly, but guardedly, urging counsels of moderation. When Frederick of Saxony consulted him, he spoke in Luther's favour. But after 1521 all hopes of conciliation were at an end: peace between Rome and Luther was thenceforth impossible. And now

both sides began to press Erasmus. The Romanists cried, 'This is all your doing: as the monks say, you laid the egg, and Luther has hatched it: you must now lose no time in speaking out, and making it clear that you are loyal to the Church of which you are a priest.' The Lutherans said: 'You know that you agree with us in your heart; you yourself have made a scathing exposure of the very abuses which we are attacking; be true to yourself, and take your place among our leaders.' Erasmus suffered, but remained silent. At last he decided to write against Luther, and in 1524 published his treatise on Free Will. Luther held that, owing to original sin, divine grace alone can turn man's will to good; Erasmus defended the doctrine of the Church, that, while grace is the indispensable and principal agent, the will is so far free as to allow for some human merit in preferring good to evil. Luther replied, and Erasmus rejoined. Thenceforth the Lutherans regarded Erasmus as an opponent;—some of

them, as a traitor; while his own side felt that he had not done them much good. For the question handled by him, however important in itself, was not the question of the hour. And indeed many will feel that this particular controversy was the greatest mistake in the life of Erasmus. Not because he entered the lists against Luther —it is intelligible that he should have felt himself constrained to do so—but because, having decided to fight, he did not raise the main issue. That issue was,—Which is the greater evil,—to endure the corruptions, or to rebel? It was open to him to contend that rebellion was the greater: but, if he was not prepared to enter on that ground, then it would have been better to keep silence.

What were the trains of thought and feeling which determined his course at that great crisis? A careful study of his own utterances will show that the considerations which swayed him were of three distinct kinds; we might describe them as ecclesiastical, intellectual, and personal.

In the first place, it is apparent that Erasmus regarded the prospect of schism, not only from a churchman's point of view, but also as a danger to social order. He thinks of the Roman Church under the image of a temporal State. Grave abuses have indeed crept into the constitution, but the State contains within itself the only legitimate agencies for reform. A citizen is entitled to lift up his voice against the abuses: but his loyalty to the head of the State must remain intact; if that head delays or declines to interfere, the citizen must be patient. And, even in denouncing evils, he must consider whether there is not a point at which denunciation, as tending to excite turbulence, may not do more harm than good. Such a view was the more natural in an age when men's minds had so long been familiar with the conception which was the basis of the Holy Roman Empire. No faults in any grade of the ecclesiastical hierarchy could do away with the feeling that Pope and Emperor were, by divine appointment, the joint

guardians of human welfare, and that a revolt against the authority of the Church was an assault on the framework which held society together. The peculiar attitude of Erasmus,—his reluctance to take part in the conflict, and the attacks made on him from both sides,—gave to his conduct the appearance of greater irresolution than can justly be laid to his charge. About one thing—this should be distinctly remembered—he never wavered. He never at any moment contemplated rebellion against the authority of Rome; he was as remote from that as were the two English friends whose views as to the abuses in the Church most nearly agreed with his own, John Colet and Thomas More. The real source of his embarrassment was that he approved, in a large measure, of Luther's objects, while he strongly disapproved of his methods.

Further, he disliked the Lutheran movement as threatening to impede the quiet progress of literature, and this in two ways,—first, by creating

a general turmoil,—secondly, by giving the schoolmen and the monks a pretext for saying that the new learning was a source of social disorder. There is a striking letter of his, written to Alberto Pio, Prince of Carpi, in 1525. He points out that the foes of the new learning had been most anxious to identify it with the Lutheran cause, in order to damage two enemies at once. Then, further,—he disliked all appeals to passion, or blind partisanship; his hope for the world was in the growing sway of reason. Two hundred and fifty years afterwards, another gifted mind, in looking back, took much the same view that Erasmus had taken in looking forward. Goethe deplored Luther's violence. But Luther might have quoted Ajax. To dream that such evils could be cured by the gentle magic of literature was indeed to chant incantations over a malady that craved the surgeon's knife.

As might have been expected, some critics of Erasmus ascribed his attitude to worldly

motives; but this was unjust, as many details of his life show. When Paul III. wished to make him a Cardinal, and to provide him with the necessary income, he declined. He was ambitious of praise, but not of wealth or rank. Personal considerations influenced him only in this sense, that he knew his own unfitness for the part of a leader or a combatant at such a time. His right place was in his study, and he grudged every hour lost to his proper work. 'I would rather work for a month at expounding St Paul,' he said to a correspondent, 'than waste a day in quarrelling.' In character and temperament he was the most perfect contrast to Luther. We remember the story of Luther being awakened in the night by a noise in his room; he lit a candle, but could find nothing; he then became certain that the invisible Enemy of his soul was present in that room,—and yet he lay down, and went calmly to sleep. There is the essence of the man—the intensely vivid sense of the supernatural, and the instinctive

recourse to it as an explanation—and the absolute faith. Erasmus was once in a town where a powder-magazine exploded, and destroyed a house which had harboured evil-doers; some one remarked that this showed the divine anger against guilt; Erasmus quietly answered that, if such anger was indeed there, it was rather against the folly which had built a powder-magazine so near a town. The man who said that could never have fought at Luther's side.

Erasmus was a great literary precursor of the Reformation; he armed the hands of the Lutherans: but to call him, as some have done, a Reformer before the Reformation, seems hardly an appropriate description. If, in our own day, those who are denominated Old Catholics had confined themselves to urging the advisability of certain reforms, without disputing the authority of the Pope or proposing to secede from communion with Rome, their position would have been analogous to that of Erasmus. Viewed as

a whole, his conduct was essentially consistent and independent.

His imperishable claim to the gratitude of the world, and especially of the Teutonic peoples, rests on the part which he sustained in a contest of even larger scope than that waged by Luther, —in the great preliminary conflict between the old and the new conception of knowledge, between the bondage and the enfranchisement of the human mind, between a lifeless formalism in religion and the spirit of practical Christianity. From youth to old age, through many trials, he worked with indomitable energy in the cause of light; and it was his great reward, that, before he died, he saw the dawn of a new age beginning for the nations of the north,— not without clouds and storm, but with the assurance that the reign of darkness was past.

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